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ABSTRACT

In considering the possibility of certifying specialists in speech communication, it is helpful to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of credentialling standards, to survey certification procedures in other professions, and to identify the steps that would have to be taken to begin a certification program. Two advantages of certification include insuring competence and helping teachers obtain employment. Some disadvantages of certification are: standards must be established, a means for meeting the standards must be devised, assurances must be provided that those certified can perform competently, means for dealing with complaints must be established, and a process of recertification must be developed. Many professions including medicine, law, and psychology have developed certification procedures, most of which include standards for graduate schools and for individuals. Steps required in speech communication for developing a certification process include exploring the issues raised, establishing standards for doctoral programs, and exploring skill evaluation. (TJ)

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CREDENTIALLING STANDARDS FOR THE COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST

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CREDENTIALLING STANDARDS FOR THE COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST

Professionalism is no longer creeping in the field of speech communication; in fact, it would not be coining a phrase to term that spread as being rampant. More and more institutions of higher education are moving away from a sole focus on service courses and teacher training and toward promoting their degrees on all levels as entryways into a wide variety of career paths, including that of a communication specialist in various organizational settings. As this aspect of the field continues to grow and mature, interest in assuring quality standards of both training and performance and in protecting the employability of speech communication graduates has also grown. The most obvious response to these concerns would be to establish some sort of certification procedures. Yet, many of us in considering this option are aware of the dilemma raised by Kathleen Rockhill: " . . . we are confronted with a real and growing social demand for certification and faced with the potential that, if we give into the demand, we will be controlled and standardized by certification requirements and, if we do not, individuals may be cut out of the economic reward structure."[1]

This paper will not attempt to unravel that dilemma; rather, we intend to place it into sharper focus for the field of speech communication by laying out an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of credentialling standards, surveying certification procedures in other professions, and suggesting what steps would have to be taken in order to begin a certification program for speech communication professionals.

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Before beginning, however, a clarification of terminology is in order. Almost universally, writers on professional standards make a distinction between certification and licensing. The distinction lies in who is creating and employing the standards. Certification is generally an activity of a professional organization of some sort, while licensing falls under the domain of the state and of state-appointed licensing boards. Credentialling is more generally associated with certification, though its use is not confined solely to that term (e.g., teacher licenses are often called credentials).

The difference between certification and licensing is important because often the former preceeds the latter. The means for determining the degree of standards that are required has been suggested by Arlene Kaplan Daniels: (1) assumed power of ethical codes; (2) consequences of control over recruitment and certification, both in terms of individuals entering the profession and of the institutions that train those individuals; and (3) the degree of control professional review boards need to exert over individual practitioners.[2] As the need for these three factors increases, one moves from an unregulated market to certification to licensing. Since speech communication professionals currently operate in an unregulated market, it seems prudent to consider certification as the primary move. In so doing, we can keep in mind J. Handly Wright's arguments made when the Public Relations Society of America deliberated pushing for licensing of their members: (1) it is impossible to define the field of public relations; thus, we do not know what we are licensing; (2) licensing would not eliminate charlatans; they would be protected by a grandfather clause; and (3) licensing is not necessary to control malpractice; professional organizations can

and are best qualified to handle that task.[3]

The demand for certification arose from the movement of the post-industrial society from a mechanical orientation toward a service orientation. If a primary responsibility of workers is to provide services to others, then a demand is created for guarantees that such services will be provided in a competent manner. By insuring competence through certification, ideally both the consumers and the providers of such services are protected.[4]

Whether or not the ideal is met, it looks as though certification is here to stay. Dean Nafziger and Michael Hiscox reported in 1976 that over two thousand occupations in the United States have some form of certification standards.[5] In an international study, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development concluded that certification has become a process of control and information in industrial societies as well as a mechanism of social selection. In fact, certification has, in many ways, replaced social criteria such as inheritance family connections, and wealth as a means of obtaining employment.[6] Yet, certification alone is no guarantee of getting a job. Nafziger and Hiscox found that such factors as the location of employment, the state of the job market, and individual employer characteristics were often better at predicting whether or not an individual would be hired than any sort of certification.[7]

Despite the advantages of certification and the proliferation of its use, there are a number of pitfalls involved in that process. First, Standards for certification must be established, and these standards must be reviewed periodically to insure that they meet current conditions. Second, a means for meeting the standards must be devised. Often, such a means includes specified types of training and/or an examination procedures.

Third, some assurances must be provided that those who are certified can perform in a competent fashion that which they are certified to do. This assurance is generally achieved through follow-up studies on the effectiveness of certified individuals. Fourth, some means of dealing with complaints about services provided by certified individuals would have to be established. Finally, a mechanism for periodically recertifying individuals would be needed. All of these steps would require a certifying organization and individuals to serve on committees, review boards, and study teams. In other words, a certification bureaucracy would have to be established that might well prove to be more costly and troublesome than it is worth.

All of this leads us to the central question: should certification standards be established for speech communication professionals? While that decision is a matter that would be better left up to a consensus of the profession, we would like to offer some observations about what we perceive to be the current state of affairs that might be of some assistance in reaching that consensus.

First, certification requires accredidation of individual training or performance, though as Nafziger and Hiscox reported only a small percentage of credentialling procedures require testing for the latter.[8] Even the accomplishment of the former would necessitate curricular review and the establishment of minimal standards for training. With the current diversity of speech communication programs yet extant in the nation's institutions of higher education, is the profession willing to undertake such a task? Moreover, often training and performance are at variance. Particularly in the study and treatment of oral communication problems, persons with training other than that of the speech communication programs could be as or more

adept as those with such training. Would training alone provide an adequate basis for certification? At least one preliminary judgment indicates that such would not be satisfactory. In Griggs v. Duke Power Company, the Supreme Court found that arbitrary educational standards alone were not sufficient as a means of restricting employment; rather, those standards had to be tied to some basis for predicting future success in order to be used as criteria for personnel selection.

Second, certification tends to restrict and control the availability of individuals to perform certain tasks. Given that speech communication graduates often find a wide variety of employment situations, would it be wise to impose any restrictions on them in their search? If certification would be confined to a single type of employment (e.g., external or internal communication consulting), has the demand for such services grown to the point where entry restriction is warranted?

Third, one of the primary functions of certification is the service that it provides to the consumer--that is, whether or not certified individuals can do what their certification claims they can do. Thus, one of the implicit assumptions of certification would be that certified individuals can perform consistently better than noncertified individuals. Could speech communication professionals make such a claim?

Finally, certification is a political process in that the certifying organization guarantees that standards will be met and maintained. In issuing such guarantees, the certifying organization has to be strong enough to assure employers that its standards mean something and to take negative sanctions against those who do not comply with the standards. Would any of the professional organizations in speech communication meet

these criteria? If so, such an organization would be wise to follow Wright's advice to the P.R.S.A. in bolstering its stand: (1) define an area of competence for its certificates; (2) identify an organized body of knowledge that all credentialees would be expected to know; (3) provide a means of demonstrating proven competence of entrants into the field; (4) provide continuing education for those it certifies; (5) provide a means for sharing knowledge with learners; (6) recognize and meet its obligations to the publics it serves; and (7) create an enforceable code of ethics.[9]

In this first section of the paper, we have attempted to look at the problems and prospects of certification. In the second section, we will review what selected other professions have done about the problem, and we will suggests steps for the profession to take should it deem certification to be a worthy endeavor.

As the profession matures and as the knowledge base of that profession develops it becomes urgent for that field of study to look carefully at the degree requirements of its programs of study and their fit with potential certification standards. The speech communication discipline is in a unique position since it is both an academic area heavily involved in the arts and sciences curriculum while at the same time becoming a profession. The proliferation of individuals from the speech communication discipline entering the ranks of professional consultants or what might be termed "communication consultants" in business, education, and government, has made it necessary that we examine professional competencies and point toward certification. Recent indications that this number is growing make this concern a crucial one.[10] To date, there has been no attempt to regulate or even to monitor the activities of communication specialists. It has been assumed that an

academic degree, any degree, allows the individual to make claims about services that can be rendered (e.g., "the ability to manage and coordinate human communication systems with attention to individual needs and motivations as well as interpersonal dynamics in dyads, groups, and the total organization"). Other professions have faced this issue over the past fifty to one hundred years. Since we are now approaching an era when we, too, need to look at the advisability of such a credentialling process, it will behove us to examine the experiences of these disciplines to see what relevance their programs may have for our own future actions.

A review of the credentialling procedures in other professions indicates that most have developed graduate education standards with some national professional association evaluating and accrediting such education. The processing of licensing is conducted by state agencies. For example, the medical profession accredits schools of medicine through the Liason Committee on Medical Education, co-sponsored by the American Medical Association and the American Association of Medical Colleges. Licensing of doctors, however, is accomplished by state boards of medical examiners. To be eligible to take the examination, though, individuals must be enrolled in an accredited medical school.[11]

The legal profession has a similar process where law schools are accredited by the American Bar Association (currently, there are 163 such schools). Licensing of attorneys is controlled through a national conference of bar examiners. Eligibility to take bar exams varies from state to state. Graduation from an accredited law school meets the requirements in every state, while five states permit "law office study" as a substitute, and five states admit accredited graduates without any examination.[12]

Perhaps the discipline most closely aligned with the type of academic complications typical of our field is psychology. As of this date, there are fifty-one state boards of examiners of psychology in the U.S. The requirements for licensing vary a great deal from state to state. While the American Psychological Association has a committee on accredidation which certifies schools of psychology, admission to state exams is not dependent upon graduation from such schools. Such status usually insures an opportunity to take the exam, however. Most accredited programs are components of university departments of psychology. Some education in psychology occurs in departments of education, counseling, and human development, though.[13]

While the psychology discipline has worked hard to develop the state licensing procedures, the American Psychology Association feels that the variance among state requirements allows for such diverse standards and criteria for licensing of psychologists that there is a need for stronger control by the profession itself. Consequently, A.P.A. is currently in the process of exploring the possibilities of establishing a national commission on education and credentialling in psychology. The function of this commission would be to designate doctoral programs in psychology on the basis of a set of criteria developed and approved by A.P.A., to monitor, review, and evaluate the education and credentialling process in psychology, and to provide a forum for the exchange of views among the education and credentialling communities in psychology.[14] This would allow the national professional association to have some control over the recognition of programs that exist outside of departments of psychology (e.g., counseling and guidance). State boards could then use this information to determine eligibility of applications to

take state examinations. The concern for this organization seems to be focused on the competency issue in that individuals from very diverse backgrounds have been licensed as psychologists (e.g., those with degrees in religion, mathematics, criminology, business, music, and English).

While the communication discipline is not even close to such well developed procedures for accreditation and licensing (nor are we sure that we ever want to move toward such a regimented procedure), we are coming face to face with some of the same competency issues. As the titles "communication specialists" or "communication consultants" becomes more accepted by the public sector as associated with specific skills and expertise, the professional associations must examine carefully how best to protect the welfare of the consumer. There is concern presently that ethical standards are not being met by individuals serving in such capacities, for example.[15] As a first step, the Speech Communication Association and the International Communication Association should form a joint commission to explore the issues raised by certification. One of the goals of such a commission could be the establishment of standards for doctoral programs claiming to be granting degrees to "communication specialists" or in related degree work, such as organizational communication. This procedure would at least allow the public identification of programs which meet standards specified by the two leading professional organizations in speech communication. We would want the commission to outline these standards specifically, in a manner similar to those specified in the A.P.A. proposal. Basic criteria for recognition might include professional training at either or both of the doctoral and masters levels, the identification of the program as one in human communication, the separate status of the program

within the institution's organizational scheme, the identification of an integrated, organized sequence of study, the designation of a separate faculty responsible for the program, the inclusion of internship or practicum opportunities, and the requirement of at least two academic years of full time graduate study for the degree.

The intent of such a plan would be to protect consumers through some kind of professional recognition of degree programs requiring at least minimal training. Along with this recognition, however, the examination of individual skills acquired through training is just as important. The granting of a degree does not necessarily guarantee proficiency, either in skill training or in services rendered.

A second prong of analysis for such a commission would be the exploration of skill evaluation. The concept of continuing education for individuals in our profession has already been proposed.[16] This type of in-servicing could also provide for a methodology whereby individuals who are acting as communication specialists could be allowed to upgrade skills and expertise. In fact, the requirement that such professionals continually update skills every several years (much like state certification requirements in education) would seem quite appropriate when considered in the context of the present proposal. Moreover, this continuing commitment of the profession to its participants requires a commitment to ethical standards, a topic which is also being discussed at this convention.

It is clear that we need to be in closer contact with the activities of practitioners in our field if we wish to call ourselves professionals. Despite the added burdens, our field should begin the process of looking at certification. Unless we do otherwise, our growth and our maturity may be stunted.

NOTES

[1]Kathleen Rockhill (Penfield), "Prospects for a Learning Society," Adult Leadership, 24 (September, 1975), p. 42.

[2]Arlene Kaplan Daniels, "How Free Should the Professions Be?" in The Professions and Their Prospects, ed. Eliot Freidson (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1973), pp. 39-57.

[3]J. Handly Wright, "White Paper on Licensing," unpublished report to the Public Relations Society of America, 1973.

[4]Alan Gartner and Frank Riessman, The Service Society and the Consumer Vanguard (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

[5]Dean H. Nafziger and Michael D. Hiscox, "A Survey of Occupational Licensing and Certification Procedures," paper presented to the National Council on Measurement in Education, San Francisco, 1976.

[6]Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Selection and Certification in Education and Employment," unpublished report, Paris, France, 1977.

[7]Nafziger and Hiscox.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Wright.

[10]Ritch Eich, "Organizational Communication Consulting: A Descriptive Study of Consultant Practices," unpublished dissertation, University of Michigan, 1976.

[11]Liason Committee on Medical Education, "Accreditation of Schools of Medicine: Policy Documents and Guidelines," unpublished document, 1973, and National Board of Medical Examiners, "Bulletin of Information and Description of Examinations," unpublished document, 1978.

[12]American Bar Association, "Approval of Law Schools, Standards, and Rules of Procedure," unpublished document, 1977.

[13]American Association of State Psychology Boards, "Towards a Definition of Training in Professional Psychology," unpublished report, 1977; American Psychological Association, "Accreditation Procedures and Criteria," unpublished document, 1973; and American Psychological Association, "Standards for Providers of Psychological Services," unpublished document, 1978.

[14]American Psychological Association, "Education and Credentialling in Psychology: Proposal for a National Commission on Education and Credentialling in Psychology," unpublished report, 1978.

[15]Sue DeWine and Anita James, "The Hippocratic Oath and Standards for Consulting," paper presented to the Speech Communication Association, Minneapolis, 1978.

[16]Jane Blankenship, "Proposal for a National Task Force on Alternative Career Opportunities," document submitted to the Administrative Committee of the Speech Communication Association, 1978.